DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 097 693 CS 201 612

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TITLE Journal Writing as a Means and an End.
PUB DATE Apr 74
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (25th, Anaheim, Calif., April 4-6, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Composition (Literary); Descriptive Writing; *English Instruction; Expository Writing; Higher Education; Secondary Education; Student Motivation; *Teaching Techniques; *Writing Exercises
IDENTIFIERS *Journal Writing

ABSTRACT

Journal writing can motivate students to write frequently, thereby creating content which can later be properly structured. Students who keep journals tend to write better than those who do not. To help students explore certain ideas in journals further, teachers should ask questions or make statements that relate to the students' ideas. Sometimes the teacher has to provide happenings about which students may write, or a book may serve as a source for some of their writing. However, the teacher should be careful not to take away the students' freedom, for it is this freedom that produces those unexpected, happy moments that make reading student papers pleasurable rather than painful. Journal writing can be the means to a happy ending--good papers. (SW)

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JOURNAL WRITING AS A MEANS AND AN END

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Journal writing is probably as old as the world's oldest profession, but there is more confusion over what one does when practicing it than there is over what one does when practicing the other. First of all it is not diary writing, as I will explain, even though Samuel Pepys in his Diary was writing much the same thing as was James Boswell in his London Journal, but with more discretion. Actually it is not either, but it is like both. It is also like the notebook writing of people like Samuel Taylor Coleridge. As I have my students practice it, it is the written record of their ideas, observations, experiences, anything of substance relating to their lives. It may turn out to be of short paragraph length developing a rather insignificant idea or of essay length developing an original idea or experience. It may be a third person narrative, a poem, even a drawing or cartoon. The only requirement I make is that if reflect their thinking and be clear enough for me to follow.

A personal experience can illustrate the difference, as I see it, between diary writing and journal writing. During the spring of 1973, while on sabbatical leave in England, my eleven-year-old son kept a diary while I kept a journal. He wrote everyday, beginning: "Got up and ate breakfast," continuing on to tell what he had done that day, ending: "Then I went to bed." I wrote in my

notebook journal whenever I had an observation to make, for instance on the relative merits of American and English beer, on the fenced-in rear English gardens, on books I read and trips we took.

In the classroom it is my major means of evaluation in nearly all the classes I teach. Two years ago I taught a speech course, Problems of Oral Communication, in which the students handed in writing each week, especially narratives of illustrative cases, in relation to what we were discussing and reading. There was no prescribed form, just the requirement that the writing relate to communication problems and be clearly written. I currently am requiring journal writing in a British Literature survey course. Some students are not able to do much more than write paraphrases with occasional personal insights while others write weekly analytical essays or long, rambling personal reactions to works or poets. What a student does is his choice. I comment on what he says, with occasional suggestions as to what he might attempt. Next year in a new course, Fiction and Film, I will continue to utilize journal writing.

In composition courses, depending on the place and time, I use it to a small or large extent. For instance, in a course at our Atlantic City Urban Center meeting one night a week for two and one half hours I am currently

conducting the course as a writing workshop in which students do formally structured work in class while keeping a notebook journal as a possible source for ideas. In my regular day composition courses, however, the major portion of the writing is journal writing, which brings us finally to the title of this essay, "Journal Writing as a Means and an End."

I think I have already indirectly revealed that a journal entry may be a rough, unfinished piece of writing, a "means," or a finished paragraph or theme. It depends on the student, his choice of subject, and how he chooses to treat it at that particular moment of writing. What I am trying to achieve is to get students to think and to write as frequently as possible. Traditional approaches too often stress structure or form which the student must fit a subject to or the student is given both the structure and the subject. My belief is that the subject must come first and that it in turn will force a structure. Structure with vapid, indifferently developed content is of little value. Of course, one might argue the lack of value of a subject with poor structure. What happens, as already mentioned, is that the subject naturally forces a specific structure or method of development. For instance, a student creates and develops an analogy without knowing what he has done until I tell him afterwards. The same is true with classification, comparison, and other methods. The subject determines the structure.

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In some cases these journal entries may be in a form considered unacceptable by instructors used to strict organization, but out of thirty to forty entries a semester (about three a week) there will be many that can be considered acceptable as finished work when first handed in. The instructor can always assign an entry to be rewritten to conform to a certain structure. The important element is that the student has already discovered his subject and merely has to structure it afterwards, sometimes with little change at all, and he always has many subjects to choose from. In this application, journal writing can be considered as prewriting.

In practice, students usually choose to rewrite entries that require little revision. They tend to ignore rewriting entries that could produce good paragraphs or themes if they would require much work. I recall a girl who wrote in one journal entry about working at the local race track. In my comments on her entry I suggested that she might write about race track jargon and slang. The following week she handed in a long list of terms with explanations, which was interesting and educational for me and the rest of the class. She never did rewrite this for an assignment, probably because she had so much other work to choose from which required much less additional work.

On the other hand (a transition which does not require a handbook), some journal entries are what I would call

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finished or end products when first handed in. The following is one of three journal entries, all of finished quality, that a student handed in for her week's work.

After concluding my last journal entry, I began thinking more and more about how relevant it's conclusion really is--not only to journal writing, but to life in general! Sometimes the mere application of your pen to a piece of paper starts your thoughts spinning off your mind to slide through that "inkily permanating" tube to flow--(sometimes carelessly splatter) across that paper landing. My conclusion drawn from my last entry led me to realize that a person should not wait for the right (inspiring) time because it may just never come, but instead a person should make the time right. This idea holds true throughout all in life. After all, if you want to easily walk through the tangling woods in order to get deep inside to surround yourself with its beauty, a pathway is needed. If you wait for the time when the wood is not dense and tangling, you may unfortunately wait forever thereby missing its glorious beauty. And it is also very possible that once the wood is less dense and is untangling, it's natural beauty may be gone also. A pathway is not there until you set out to make it and the easiest way to start a pathway is to take that first step into the tangling brush.

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This, like the other two, could be considered as exemplifying a specific method or methods of development, which neither the student or I would need to identify in order, in her case, to write the paragraphs or, in mine, to react appreciatively to her thinking. The same girl once responded in detail to my interest in her not capitalizing the first person pronoun. In other words, she was a thinking student put into a situation of having to do a great deal of thinking in order to produce three journal entries a week.

Of course, every student does not write this well all of the time or even some of the time. In general, though, more students are liberated into writing more frequently and more boldly than they otherwise would. The students in my night workshop class might learn more about correctness and structure, but their writing is rarely as interesting and stimulating as that in my journal writing classes and, as I will mention later, these students also learn correctness and structure.

In a paper like this I can't reproduce some of the excellent long pieces of writing I have had turned in during the last few years, but I will refer to them the best I can. One student, as part of a week's work, once handed in an entry with perfect theme form. He would often hand in a poem, a short narrative and some expository writing. When I told him that the one entry was

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a model theme, he expressed great surprise, not knowing what I meant. At the time, late in the semester, I was preparing to introduce my classes to theme writing and told him that I would like to use his journal entry or theme as an example for the other students. Instead of his having to write a theme I asked him to put his work, including drawings, on a master, which he did, and which I have used ever since. Another time a girl spent a weekend in New York and converted her experience into a long thematic narrative of about 1,500 words. At the time we were discussing films and writing on that general topic. Her narrative, although not about a film, reads like one, being very visual. It could almost serve as a film scenario. A male student the same semester also wrote a narrative of about 1,500 words. It all began with his volunteering to fight a local forest fire and continually being amazed at the carefree attitude of the firemen and their indifference toward his repeated offers of assistance.

This kind of writing really excites me, especially when it is done by students like this latter one who drifted through high school with little interest in studies and without great ability and who start college the same way until suddenly something happens inside of them that makes them enjoy writing and, in turn, other studies. When I used to teach the 500-word theme all semester this never happened, but I recall students with exceptional ability dropping out. This method is much more effective overall and much more satisfying for me as a teacher.

And just how do students learn to write themes? At our College we have taught just the paragraph in English Composition I for the last two years. The theme is taught in English Composition II. What I do, very simply, is introduce them to the topic sentence or the thesis sentence, point out how they have been doing similar writing all along, and then assign a series of paragraphs or themes to be written from journal entries selected by them. They already have the subject. All tney need now is the structure, which is probably already there. They may not produce sophisticatedly developed writing, but they write more easily and more naturally and, like others before them, can learn the other if faced with it. Haven't we? Fortunately, most of them never will be.

When they do hand in a paragraph or theme I treat it in a traditional way, indicating various kinds of errors and requiring revision when needed. In fact, I require revision until a work becomes an acceptable piece of writing. I don't use grades, however, just a kind of check in my mark book. In contrast, I never write on journal entries. I place in their folder, on a sheet of pad paper, my comments or questions in relation to what they have said, rarely in relation to how they have said it. I want them to feel free, but most still write with a degree of concern for correctness. This way I am making

a personal response to their ideas or experiences without the qualifying comment about correctness beginning with the word however. Of course, I might comment on a lack of details or the need for more clarity in a way that the student, without feeling inhibited, might make future improvements. In the case of very poorly written work I can request the student to rewrite. An alternative to the written comment is the use of a cassette tape, which is replaced in the student's folder after the instructor has recorded his comments. Regardless of the method, the instructor should concentrate on asking questions or making statements that relate to the student's ideas and that might encourage him in further thought on the topic.

Journal writing does not work as well, however, without a catalyst for ideas. When I tell students, as I have in a few classes, to write about whatever is happening around them, in their immediate world or the larger, further removed world, some produce some good writing, but the total result is relatively disappointing. I prefer to use a book that will be provocative enought to be a source for the majority of the things they write. But, as my examples indicate, it is the freedom itself that produces those unexpected, happy moments that make reading student papers pleasurable rather than painful. A panacea journal writing may not be, but it is a means to an end.